



Story-builder: A Language Tool for Documentation and Teaching

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What it is

Story-builder is a set of picture cards for language activities.

The cards are specially designed to facilitate creative story-telling and to get speakers producing natural speech on a wide range of topics.

Story-builder was developed with both language-learning communities and research linguists in mind. It can be adapted for many uses, from language-learning games, to linguistic fieldwork.

Because it is picture-based, Story-builder can be used with any language, or in multi-lingual contexts.

The Deck

The 62-card Story-builder deck contains 7 'character cards' (and matching 'character tokens') and 55 'action cards':

Character cards depict a character who is female or male, adult or child, or indefinite. These are the protagonists of stories – the people that stories can be told 'about'. In addition to using the character cards, speakers can tell stories from their own perspective ("I...") and can include their peers ("you...", "my friend Dory..." etc.).

Character tokens are miniature versions of the character cards. These may be (optionally) placed on top of other cards and used as memory devices to help remember who-did-what when telling longer stories.

Action cards represent 'actions' or 'events'; they are the pieces of a story. Just like beads can be strung together on sequence to create a necklace, action cards can be strung together in a sequence to visually anchor a story. Each action card can be thought of as representing a verb or phrase. For instance, the following cards represent the verbs 'to trade, exchange', 'to be angry', and 'to smell':



Example translations are provided (in English) in the bottom left-hand corner of each card. These translations are not the only possible ones, however – speakers may wish to interpret the cards in different ways. The androgynous characters and indefinite objects depicted in action cards are there to help illustrate a particular verb or phrase. Speakers are free to refer to these details of individual cards, or abstract away from them and just use the verb or phrase, as desired for individual stories.

Verbs Represented in the deck

The Story-builder deck has been designed to visually represent basic verbs from across the semantic spectrum. This means that the 55 verbal concepts depicted in the action cards represent a wide selection of meanings. The meanings depicted are also those that are likely to occur in many of the world's languages, making the cards useful for cross-linguistic use and comparison.

- For **language teachers**, this means playing with the cards exposes students to a wide variety of verb types for efficient language learning.
- For **linguists**, this means that the Story-builder deck is particularly well suited to studying verb classes and argument structure.
- For **language documentation**, Story-builder can be used to elicit speech on a wide range of topics, involving many sentence types.



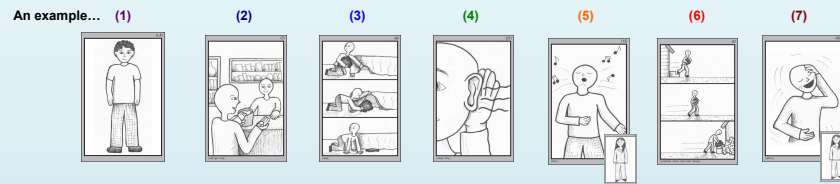
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"Story-building" explained

"Story-building" is the process of using character cards and action cards to create a visual story. It involves **two types of moves**:

- First, a character card is chosen and placed down on the playing surface in order to represent the main character of the story-to-be.**
- Next, action cards are placed alongside the character card in sequence; stories are narrated by relating the events depicted in the action cards with the story's character(s).**

The only rule that speakers follow in telling their stories is that they must express a word or phrase that relates to what is depicted on each action card. Aside from this, speakers are free to improvise and embellish their stories as much as desired. Story-building works best if speakers are allowed to introduce additional characters at any point in their story. Character tokens can optionally be used to represent these new characters.



The Story: (1) "So there's this **man named Bill**." (2) "Now he really likes cookies. So he decides to go to the store to **buy** some." (3) "When he got home he started to **hide** them in his closet, because he didn't want to let anybody know he had them, or else he would have to share." (4) "But just then, he **heard** someone coming." (5) "It was his sister, and she was walking down the hall **singing**." (6) "So he got out of there quick, and he **brought** the cookies with him so he could hide them somewhere else – maybe in the shed." (7) "But his sister saw him sneaking out the window and started **laughing** at him, because she knew exactly what he was up to."

Example Activities

Pick-1

Example: "The two men were having a heated argument. And they weren't coming to any resolution of their argument. Their hearts were hard. (Their friend) Rita overheard them, and she was very saddened by what she heard." (vB)

Speakers simply take turns picking an action card (either randomly or by choice) and making up a short story, description, or anecdote involving the verb or phrase represented on the card.

Group Story-building

Have speakers work together in pairs, small groups, or one large group to cooperatively build stories. Speakers take turns adding one action card (a card of their choice, or one chosen randomly from the deck) into the story and narrating the result.

Pick-3

Example: "Once upon a time there was a woman named Lola. One day at work, she was sitting around daydreaming. She imagined it was sunny out, and that she was going for a walk in the sunshine. But at a sudden she was startled out of her pleasant daydream."

Speakers pick 3 action cards and use them to create short stories.

Variations: Challenge speakers to re-order their cards or trade cards with other speakers to create new stories; have speakers join their 3-card stories together to create longer stories; etc.

Multi-player Competitive Game

Example Rule Set:
 Maintain 6 cards face-up in the middle of the table to pick from. Players start with 1 card. Players take turns rolling a die:
 Roll 1, 2, or 3: Pick a card from the middle of the table and incorporate it into your story.
 Roll 4: Trade one of your cards with the player to your left and incorporate it into your story.
 Roll 5: Steal a card from any player and incorporate it into your story.
 Roll 6: The player to your right steals a card from you.
 Restart when stories are 6 cards.

There are many ways to combine creative story-telling with an element of chance to make a fun, social, and mildly competitive game for 2-5 players (per deck used).

Variations: Introduce a point-system by colour-coding cards and assigning point values to different colours; experiment with different rule sets.

For Linguists

Story-builder is a useful and adaptable tool both for research linguists investigating the structure of a particular language and for language documenters collecting diverse sentence types, genres, and vocabulary.

Methodological advantages:

- Story-builder cards can be used to create discourse contexts within which to elicit specific language data. Because discourse contexts are constructed visually, they delimit their own spatio-temporal framework. This means that language consultants are less likely to be confused or influenced by contexts introduced previously.
- Language data can be elicited directly in the target language without interference from the metalanguage.
- Story-builder helps to elicit spontaneous, natural speech with one or more speakers.
- Being picture-based, data elicited with Story-builder cards are amenable to cross-linguistic comparison.
- Using Story-builder is a fun way to break up tedious elicitation sessions, and is a good resource to have on hand in case there is time to spare in a session.
- Language consultants tend to enjoy working with the cards. The cards help consultants "think through" difficult constructions and allow them to be creative story-tellers.

For Teachers

The Story-builder card set can be adapted into many different games and activities conducive to language learning. Games and activities can involve whole language classes, small groups of students, or individual students.

Story-builder is especially useful for intermediate-to-advanced language-learners who are learning how to connect ideas and sentences into larger stories and discourses.

Beginners in a language can use Story-builder cards as flash cards for increasing their vocabulary.

Story-builder is well suited to conversation-based classes.

Game/Activity ideas: flash-cards, small-groups story-telling, question-and-answer games, memory, picture charades, songs, narrated skits.

Tips for classroom use

- Students may need time to get acquainted with the cards and associated vocabulary. For less advanced language learners, teachers may wish to introduce only a few cards per lesson. In this way, students may gradually build their vocabulary until they are able to use a word or phrase to describe each action card.
- It may be helpful for teachers and/or students to select just one or two specific translations to learn for each action card. These translations can be written on the back of cards (and erased later if the card is laminated) so that if a student forgets a translation, he or she can just turn the card over. When working with more advanced students, teachers can allow more freedom in interpreting the cards.
- If desk space is limited, try making the cards into magnets.

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